

# **Bible Studies for Life Series for December 24: Jesus, God's greatest gift to his people**

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## **Bible Studies for Life Series for December 24**

### **Jesus, God's greatest gift to his people**

- Luke 1:26-35; 2:4-7

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A colleague recently told me a story that well illustrates the importance of remembering and reflecting on the Christmas story of Jesus' birth.

Several years ago, my friend took her 3-year-old granddaughter to see a "walk through Bethlehem" presentation at a local church. By her account, the church had done an excellent job of recreating the look, feel and, yes, even the smell of an ancient, Palestinian village complete with shops, homes, artisans, soldiers and animals.

At the end of the "walk," participants were ushered into the manger scene where Mary, Joseph and a very real baby Jesus shared the small, cave-like space with the anticipated donkey, sheep and goat.

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Carol and her granddaughter stood staring at the scene. The 3-year-old was transfixed—gazing intently at the dramatization before her. Soon, the line behind them began to grow, and Carol convinced her reluctant granddaughter it was time to move on.

As they walked out of the church, Carol remembers her granddaughter began to cry. Carol asked her, “What’s wrong?” Her granddaughter’s reply stopped Carol in her tracks and gave me reason for pause as she related the story. Through tear-filled eyes the little girl protested to her grandmother, “I wasn’t finished at the manger!”

For most people in the world, and for some in the church, Christmas is a time for gift giving and receiving, for parties and presents, for visiting with family and friends. While some in the world and most in the church acknowledge the significance of Jesus’ birth as the reason for all this activity, many spend not enough time at the manger. Over the next two weeks, the lessons from Luke’s account of the good news of Jesus’ birth give us the opportunity to spend some time at the manger, reflecting on the significance of Jesus’ birth.

Along with Matthew, Luke’s Gospel provides the marvelous “Christmas” details that make up much of our experience of the Christmas season. While Matthew tells the tale of a star in the sky, wise men from the east, a raging King Herod and an escape to Egypt, Luke relates the story of a government imposed census, a journey to Bethlehem, shepherds in a field

and angels heard from on high.

Luke, perhaps more than Matthew, is determined to demonstrate the historical setting and reliability of the story he presents. The consummate historian, Luke goes to great pains to make sure the reader knows precisely when these events take place. Luke tells us of a census commanded by the emperor Augustus, but adds, "This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria" (2:2). Luke's level of precision lets the reader know that these things happened at a particular time (during the first census, not the presumed second or perhaps even third census ordered by the emperor).

Luke's concern for historical exactness lies second to his concern for demonstrating how these events fit into God's plan for the world. In the focal passages, Luke demonstrates God's role in the events taking place by focusing on the role of angels who function as the messenger force of God.

God sends the angel Gabriel to Mary (1:26-27). Previously, the angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah (1:11), and subsequently, to the shepherds in the field (2:9). Luke wants the reader to know the events portrayed here are not accidents of history, but rather, a part of God's plan to save the world.

When Gabriel comes to Mary with his announcement that she will give birth to a son, Luke emphasizes three elements. First, Luke describes Mary as "highly favored" 1:28 and as one who "has found favor with God" (1:30). Clearly, we are to understand that Mary was a good person who had garnered some merit from God; however, her merit is not what sets her apart.

If there is anything special about Mary we find it in her accepting response to God's grace extended to her. Her reply to God's great initiative to her comes in 1:38, "May it be to me as you have said."

Second, Luke tells us the name of the child will be Jesus (1:31). Matthew's account also provides this detail about the name of the child; however, Matthew provides the explanatory note, "because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Jesus is the Greek form of the name Joshua, which means, "The Lord saves." Jesus' very name constantly reminds us of God's saving purpose.

Third, Luke reminds the reader of Mary's virginal status. There is no denying the scandalous circumstances described by both Matthew and Luke surrounding the Jesus' birth. An engaged couple who have not come together sexually end up pregnant (Matthew 1:18-19). In other times and in other places, this would be the kind of story we would cover up; but the Gospel writers do not cover it up, and in fact, this virginal conception becomes the centerpiece of narrative.

That both Luke and Matthew see fit to include an account of "the virgin birth," lends veracity and credibility to the claim of Jesus' unique status as God's son. Discussions of the virgin birth should focus on the virginal conception of Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit and not on the mistaken notion that Mary was perpetually a virgin. Mary was a real woman, really married to Joseph and the mother of other children (Mark 3:31-33).

Gabriel's announcement to Mary also provides information about the child Jesus. The description of Jesus in 1:32-33 focuses on Jesus' status as God's son. This child "will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." Luke connects the birth of this child to the history of Israel and to the future of the world. What God has begun comes to the beginning of completion in the birth of this child.

The opening verses of chapter 2 (vv. 1-7) famously describe the lowly circumstances of Jesus' birth in a manger in Bethlehem. The rejection of

this weary family looking for a place to rest foreshadows the rejection of Jesus by his own people.

The power of this narrative should not be underestimated. Many nominal, once-a-year churchgoers will hear and feel this story in the depth of their being. Allow folks to spend some time at the manger, but remind them Jesus did not stay a baby. Jesus, Luke tells us, grew up and found favor with God and the people around him, and he did and said marvelous things. Most importantly, Jesus' died for the sins of the world, and conquered death by his resurrection.

When we accept God's gift of grace, when we say as Mary said, "may it be to me as you have said," we experience the gift of Jesus in our lives. This is the good news that begins with the birth of a baby in a manger in Bethlehem.

### **Discussion questions**

- How do the Gospel writers emphasize the significance and uniqueness of Jesus' birth?
- Why is it important for Christians to reflect on the story of Jesus' birth annually?
- How might we take to heart Mary's words, "May it be to me as you have said"?

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